

THE MIND'S EYE

A Liberal Arts Journal
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts



**Self-Portrait in a Complex Poem: A New Reading of John
Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"**

By Karen Pepper

Poetry by

Stephen Philbrick

Colin Harrington

Eileen Gloster

Vision and Blindness in Greek Tragedy

By Gerol Petruzella

Artwork

By Greg Scheckler

Reviews by

Ben Jacques

Meera Tamaya

Robert Bence

Spring 2001

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SPRING 2001

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts

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Editor's File

The Mind's Eye is alive and well. After a number of unsettling issues threatened to derail the publication during the fall, it has landed on its feet and is now on its way toward a new and exciting beginning. With renewed support from the college and an expanded Editorial Board, the journal has begun to extend its readership and contributor base and is currently in the process of planning an ambitious marketing program designed to create a more economically self-sufficient and visually appealing product. Accordingly, the journal invites your contributions, which can range from the scholarly article to short fiction, poetry, reviews and artwork. Our aim is to provide an interesting and appealing assortment of quality work, from both MCLA faculty and an increasing number of guest contributors.

We celebrate our reinvigorated mission with a Spring 2001 number that features the talents of a variety of people. Karen Pepper begins with a thought-provoking essay on a classic poem by John Ashbery. Her tracing of the enigmatic "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" is echoed by Gerol Petruzella's probe into the mysteries of "Vision and Blindness in Greek Tragedy," a truly inspired piece by a graduating MCLA senior. This issue is also graced by a variety of excellent poetry from the "pens" of Stephen Philbrick, Colin Harrington and Eileen Gloster. We are fortunate to have the opportunity to publish some of Greg Scheckler's abstract drawings and to feature as well reviews by Robert Bence, Meera Tamaya and Ben Jacques. We welcome this range of creativity and hope that future issues will continue to reflect a similar variety of expression. The deadline for submissions to the Fall 2001 edition is July 15.

Tony Gengarely
Managing Editor

Self-Portrait in a Complex Poem: *A New Reading of John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"*

BY KAREN PEPPER

*As silent as a mirror is believed
Realities plunge in silence by. . . .*

Hart Crane, "Legend"

Render glass opaque and it becomes a mirror, holding in its smooth, unwavering surface the snare of a reflected image. Render glass transparent and it becomes a window, a pane of thin protection against the vagaries of weather, a clear and undistorting conduit. The mirror presents to the viewer an abstracted self; the window presents a segment of the world that lies outside the self. Now mirror, now window: The work of art provides both artist and observer the two visions.

In his magnificent poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," John Ashbery directs his gaze not toward a glass surface but toward the self-portrait painted in the 16th century by the Italian painter Parmigianino.



Parmigianino (Francesco Mazzola) *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* 1524
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Parmigianino's painting is, however, the first mirror portrait, a rendition of what the painter saw in mirroring glass. This was not a flat mirror but a convex one; the painting bears the same title as the poem.

The painting serves Ashbery as the actual mirror served Parmigianino: The painting is not only the object of Ashbery's gaze but also that which propagates his self-reflection. In both cases, observation is the point of entry into artistic creation. Just as Parmigianino gazed into a mirror in order to examine the image he would portray in his painting, so Ashbery gazes at Parmigianino's portrait in order to find an image of himself, to see himself, that is, both as object and as observer. The poem thus becomes Ashbery's self-portrait.

But it becomes clear that the portrait, in both cases, is a limiting one. Parmigianino exists for us in his portrait only (or, more precisely, in his oeuvre—that portion of his work that has been preserved). We know Parmigianino only through what his art portrays; the man is somehow locked into or locked up in the work. Ashbery surmises that he himself will one day likewise be locked into the poem he has written.

At first, Parmigianino's self-portrait merely captures the attention of the observer; later, its power to seduce becomes overwhelming. The image of Parmigianino, at first external to and separate from the poet, ultimately invades him, until the poet's difficulty in extricating himself from his entangled observation of the painting becomes unbearable. It is at this point that the poet's gaze must break off from the object of its regard. The poet's gaze, which began in rapture, ends, thus, in terror. Finally, the painting will have to be destroyed if the poet is to complete *his* most important task, the creation of his own self-portrait; i.e., the writing of the poem.

It is not the painting but, rather, the intensity of the poet's gaze as he observes the painting that ultimately subverts his intention. Art, Ashbery seems to be saying, cannot be achieved without lending oneself to the world, though this entails the risk that the self will fragment or dissolve. Artistic creation is the nearly impossible act of balance between sending oneself out and hauling oneself back in, recognizing otherness but not being dissolved in it.

There are three time frames in the poem. First, that in which Parmigianino lived and painted, which appears in the discussion of

the technical aspects of the painting. Second, that in which Ashbery observed the painting: in Vienna, in 1959, in the company of Pierre (presumably the poet Pierre Martory). Third, that in which Ashbery wrote the poem, which was first published in 1972. In the real "present" of the poem, the moment of writing, Ashbery is in New York City, and what occurred in Vienna exists as a memory.

It is not accidental that Ashbery chose as the object of his gaze a portrait that was painted on a wooden hemisphere rather than a flat canvas: It is precisely the curved surface that presents at once a smooth exterior and yet tantalizes us with its promise of inner depth or deeper significance. Language, Ashbery implies, may have a similar spherical quality—the more enticingly beautiful its music, the more entitled we feel we are to have it mean something.

And just as there are no words for the surface, that is,
No words to say what it really is, that it is not
Superficial but a visible core, then there is
No way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience.
(lines 92–95)

The distinction between surface and depth, as well as the difficulty of discerning depth, is conveyed in the image of "a dozing whale on the sea bottom / In relation to the tiny, self-important ship / On the surface" (77–79). But the reader should not be misled by the playfulness at the surface of this image into ignoring the depth of Ashbery's seriousness. In asking whether all is surface, whether, in other words, all that we may have of a work of visual art is, in fact, its appearance—or of a poem, its words—Ashbery also asks whether all we can know of another life is that which is presented to us, or etched on the surface; i.e., the person's appearance and behavior—or whether there exists an underlying soul, however elusive that may be. (Language may lie precisely at the interface.)

Parmigianino's portrait is extremely lifelike. As the poet imagines the eyes that once peered out of the face that is portrayed in the painting, he reflects upon the relationship between these eyes, or windows of the soul, and the soul that is trapped within the skull, trying desper-

ately to get out but irrevocably imprisoned: "The soul has to stay where it is, / Even though restless" (34–35). The convex mirror is thus also a convict's mirror: Ashbery suggests that the artist is imprisoned not only by time and the limits of human perception but also by the very works of art he has created in order to escape time's imprisonment. The work of art, Ashbery suggests, fixes the artist as the person he is at the moment of painting (or writing), thereby ending his becoming or evolving, even before death places its final seal.

"The soul establishes itself. / But how far can it swim out through the eyes / And still return safely to its nest?" (24–26). In comparing the soul first to a fish (it swims) and then to a bird (which returns to its nest), Ashbery accomplishes, with extraordinary compression, an exact rendering of the slipperiness of the concept of soul.

The hand, the implement of art, is analogous to the soul, insofar as it both reaches out from the self and slinks back in. Ashbery begins, "As Parmigianino did it, the right hand" (1). In the painting, the hand seems to be distorted, almost grotesquely large in comparison with the rest:

One would like to stick one's hand
Out of the globe, but its dimension,
What carries it, will not allow it.
No doubt it is this, not the reflex
To hide something, which makes the hand loom large
As it retreats slightly. (56–61)

The hand extends the body outward, toward external reality and toward others. It not only paints and writes, however; it offers: It is the hand of the artist that releases the work of art, offering it to the world. The hand is the agent that transmits art from the intensely private or inner domain of the artist to a domain that is more public and general; it is the hand that waves goodbye, "Like a wave breaking on a rock, giving up / Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape" (199–200). Finally, the hand, "Roving back to the body of which it seems / So unlikely a part" (64–65), is presented as a shield, held up to protect and hide, even as it seeks to reach outward, toward another.

Evident in these lines is the depth of the ambivalence that lies at the heart of the communicative impulse:

Therefore I beseech you, withdraw that hand,
Offer it no longer as shield or greeting,
The shield of a greeting, Francesco: (525–527)

The facility with which Ashbery shifts the reader's attention from Parmigianino's painting to the writing of Ashbery's own self-portrait is disarming. Plunged one minute into the recollection of Parmigianino's portrait, the poet is, the next minute, distracted. With the section beginning "The balloon pops, the attention turns dully away" (100–101), Ashbery invites the reader to witness something of the process by which he writes. Daydreams are not ignored but, like other randomness and seemingly irrelevant digressions that the mind makes, are gathered in, to be accorded a place in the poem.

This technique of inclusion offers us an important clue to the poet's process, but also alerts us to the problem of fragmentation of the self, which appears to be necessary for creativity, though, if not restrained, inimical to it. It is not clear where the self's integrity may lie, in the face of all that pulls it apart. When he examines the composition of himself, Ashbery finds that "no part / Remains that is surely you" (112–113), so much is one composed of others. There is, he suggests, a certain likelihood, present at all times, that the self will disintegrate into its myriad components. Perhaps it is possible to compose oneself by gazing into that which is truly other—here, the portrait of Parmigianino. But the gaze by which the poet strives to find a focusing center becomes mutual: The painting has become a mirror, which gazes back. This returned gaze is not without its danger for the viewer. As Lawrence Raab has written in his poem "Permanence":

I can't remember how old I was,
but I used to stand in front
of the bathroom mirror, trying to imagine
what it would be like to be dead.
I thought I'd have some sense of it
if I looked far enough into my own eyes,

as if my gaze, meeting itself,
would make an absence, and exclude me. (lines 1–8)

Likewise, so utterly engaging is Parmigianino's face as Ashbery observes it—"the painter's / Reflected face, in which we linger" (495–496)—that it holds within it the threat of the poet's annihilation:

So that you could be fooled for a moment
Before you realize the reflection
Isn't yours. You feel then like one of those
Hoffmann characters who have been deprived
Of a reflection, except that the whole of me
Is seen to be supplanted by the strict
Otherness of the painter (233–239)

Absorption in the other is what Parmigianino's portrait provides the poet: "This otherness, this / 'Not-being-us' is all there is to look at / In the mirror" (476–478). Yet this absorption serves not to expand the self but, rather, to annihilate it, at the very moment that one succeeds in creating a work of art. And perhaps this is connected to that formaldehydelike quality that art seems to have for Ashbery. The self is not a fixed entity; rather, as Ashbery suggests, it is fluid and changing, but art belies this by fixing the self, much as photography fixes the fluidity of movement into a still image.

Delving too profoundly into memory is not without the same attendant risk. Perhaps memory betrays by its sheer inaccuracy. In the lines "I go on consulting / This mirror that is no longer mine" (332–333), memory appears to be a false mirror, which distorts as much as it portrays. Memory, then, is so inexact as to fail as a mirror, blocking our access to the past instead of facilitating it.

Although art appears to fix time, thereby sustaining the individual, at least figuratively, beyond the temporal confinement of his physical lifetime, art is no more accurate a mirror of the past than memory. Yet these are still the best we have. If memory never yields the full truth, we are bound to come back to it, again and again. Our perception of time, then, is not of something linear but, rather, of something circular or omnipresent: "The end is where we start from" (Eliot 144).

The globe shape of Parmigianino's painting mimics the apparent "shape" of time itself: a wheel or cylinder that spins frantically around us, producing a tumbled mess of fragmentary images. We are, at any given moment, simultaneously aware of all of them and also aware of their bizarre simultaneity in the mind—what Ashbery brilliantly calls "a magma of interiors" (131). Elsewhere, he refers to the "concentric growing up of days / Around a life" (309–310), another image of the circularity of time.

The present, on the other hand, is not entirely comfortable, and not merely because it is incomplete. There is in this poem a great ambivalence toward the present, as if it were, at best, a pale film laid lightly over the past: "at least / *This* thing, the mute, undivided present, / Has the justification of logic" (437–439) and, elsewhere, "I think it is trying to say it is today / And we must get out of it" (395–396).

The critic David Kalstone has written that Ashbery "knows the present only from before and after, seen as through a terrifying hourglass" (183). Or perhaps through a flattened hourglass, as Ashbery reports: "That is, all time / Reduces to no special time" (403–404), again reminiscent of T. S. Eliot, "all time is eternally present" (117).

The present, the moment of writing, is Ashbery's anchor:

Today has that special, lapidary
Todayness that the sunlight reproduces
Faithfully in casting twig-shadows on blithe
Sidewalks. No previous day would have been like this.
I used to think they were all alike,
That the present always looked the same to everybody
But this confusion drains away as one
Is always cresting into one's present. (379–386)

Yet, even as we seek to have the present moment, to grasp it sufficiently so as to put it down on paper, it escapes, and the telling intrudes: "twisting the end result / Into a caricature of itself. . . . It is the principle that makes works of art so unlike / What the artist intended" (442–443, 447–448).

Ashbery thus considers the degree of conscious control that the

artist can exert over the work. The artist's intention is evidently subordinate to something else, which Ashbery never quite names. The poet finds:

He has omitted the thing he started out to say
In the first place. Seduced by flowers,
Explicit pleasures, he blames himself (though
Secretly satisfied with the result), imagining
He had a say in the matter and exercised
An option of which he was hardly conscious,
Unaware that necessity circumvents such resolutions
So as to create something new
For itself, that there is no other way, (449–457)

These lines echo Randall Jarrell's remark, in his essay "The Obscurity of the Poet," "The poet writes his poem for its own sake, for the sake of that order of things in which the poem takes the place that has awaited it" (21). Ashbery continues:

that there is no other way,
That the history of creation proceeds according to
Stringent laws, and that things
Do get done in this way, but never the things
We set out to accomplish and wanted so desperately
To see come into being (457–462)

And it is not only Ashbery's art that gets done in this fashion, but all art: "Parmigianino / Must have realized this as he worked at his / Life-obstructing task" (462–464). The artist can fully live only through his art, even though, paradoxically, it is "life-obstructing." The work of art, or, more precisely, the process by which it is created, may consume the artist. In the poem, the terror of being consumed by art becomes apparent as the poet begins figuratively to demolish the painting. Parmigianino, it turns out, was only "Aping naturalness" (516); what he thereby produced "Remains a frozen gesture of welcome etched / On the air materializing behind it, / A convention" (519–521).

That the poet's gaze outward has hindered him from achieving his own self-portrait gradually becomes clear. His fascination with Parmigianino's painting represents both absorption into the other to the point of losing himself and absorption into the past to the point of failing to seize the present. Finally, a point of desperation is reached: "There is room for one bullet in the chamber" (528). Time, however, will do the job more cleanly than any bullet. Pushed into the past by the intrusive present, Parmigianino falls back "at a speed / Faster than that of light to flatten ultimately / Among the features of the room" (530-532). Once Parmigianino has been swept away, the poet's own creative work can proceed. Thus, the sooner the conventions of other artists "are burnt up / The better for the roles we have to play" (523-524).

For Ashbery, the creative act hurls us into the present, even as time does. Perhaps creativity is an affirmation of time. The present, though, this strange simultaneity of anticipation and its fulfillment, has a tentative, tenuous quality. Certainly, love is of the present. Ashbery speaks of love as being "shadowed, invisible, / Though mysteriously present, around somewhere" (346-347). In tinkering with the notion that love is not located in time or place, Ashbery finds it, therefore, everywhere:

But the look
Some wear as a sign makes one want to
Push forward ignoring the apparent
Naïveté of the attempt, not caring
That no one is listening, since the light
Has been lit once and for all in their eyes
And is present, unimpaired (355-361)

All art may be portraiture of the self, either looked at head-on, as with the declared self-portrait or memoir, or looked at through the lens of something outside ourselves, be it the portrait of another person or the description of a landscape, which we "see" by imaginatively projecting ourselves into it. It is the self we come back to. Confronted with Parmigianino's portrait, the observer comes back again and again to his own thoughts, memory and artistic process, to the need to es-

cape from himself and the impossibility of doing so. Thus, a closed circle or sphere appears to be drawn around the self: "the soul is not a soul, / Has no secret, is small, and it fits / Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention" (44–46).

What Ashbery has done is to make explicit that process by which we expend ourselves at the task of writing. Art appears in this poem to be that which enables us to explore the fluid transition between self-reflection and the observation of what lies outside the self. Through art, we attempt to breach the temporal and geographical limits of our existence as individuals, but it doesn't quite work. Rather, art exists for its own sake and for whatever will be made of it by others at some time in the future. The poet, however generous his offering, must remain enclosed within the sphere of himself, with its encumbent limitations.

The poem may be able to take that ultimate leap away from the self, detaching itself from the poet and existing in some "intersoulular" space, where it is deeply available to others—in this case, to us, the readers. Thus, art does escape the endlessly self-referential circle in which the individual mind moves, but as it does so, it moves away from the artist who produced it. At that postpartum moment when the work of art leaves the hand of the artist, it belongs entirely to a world that must, in order to understand it, fill it with its own projected desires and intentions. And what the artist put into his art—his very soul—may have little connection, if any, to what will subsequently be drawn from it. Art would not be art, however, if it were not imbued with the qualities of the observer:

But it is certain that

What is beautiful seems so only in relation to a specific
Life, experienced or not, channeled into some form
Steeped in the nostalgia of a collective past (325–328)

Without our experience, memory and sensibility, we the observers could not inform the painting, or the poem, sufficiently to appreciate it; that is, to give it the only meaning it can have for us.

On the other hand, and tragically, as the work of art comes to

belong to the world, it no longer belongs to the artist, who is left in a state of perpetual bereavement for what he has bequeathed. The work of art will belong, ultimately, to those viewers (or readers) whose intensity of observation can render it meaningful, much as Ashbery, by the intensity of his gaze, renders meaningful the portrait of Parmigianino. The work of the artist, then, involves giving oneself over to the art, so that others may later partake.

The poem belongs to the poet only in the present, at the moment he is writing, "our moment of attention." No matter how much of himself lies sealed within it, the poem, once written, is no longer his to keep. Ashbery refers to the time that he was with Pierre in Vienna not to recapture that time but to acknowledge its transience. The loss of that moment, however, is but a pale reflection of the greater loss that writing the poem represents. Ashbery has poured his soul into his poem only to realize that this is where it will remain. With this realization, his hand returns to stillness. The poem has become the visible aspect of the soul, that part of it that will extend through time. This exquisitely wrought surface is always present. It is that which now requests our gaze.

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Three Poems

BY STEPHEN PHILBRICK

I Seldom Think of You

I seldom think of you.

I walk out upon you,

Breathe within you,

Beat your blood.

I never remember you.

Every member, every cockle finger,

Every part I could lose, every part I can't,

Is you.

I made children after you

And thrilled with loss.

And lost the resemblance

As they grew into it.

I never call your name.

No fish in the ocean says "water."

I hear it, wave on wave, stone on stone,

The storm beyond the surface.

I seldom think of you;

All I do is touch you.

Pain is no lesson, joy is no less.

I live you now, others will later.

Nothing Lived

Stop thinking about dying and loss.
Stop denying dying and loss, as well.
Forget them; and river, bank, and course.

Remember only motion of water—moss
And stones fall back—and the motion at mind's end.
Only shoulders, only ripple: never horse.

They are songs for the wedding of us and Is.
Yes, of: you-and-knock to: open-and-All.
The ones within each other, at last, lost.

Stop thinking about spring and silence.
Stop denying spring in silence or hell.
Summer and increase never explain themselves.

Any idea was ours, such as thorn or rose.
Just the kind of soil that invites anthills;
The comet neutered in the goat's sack; who chose?

Stop thinking about dying and loss.
There is a drop for every drop in the well.
The Law's in each face; broken; the word's in each shell.
Don't forget, don't remember; nothing lived is lost.

Love Story for a Cold Climate

The best take place on islands;
We can pretend they are local and ours.
They demand plains in flame in the background.
Mountains are too true to be trusted: What if they don't melt?
Nevertheless, like old friends and new thieves, they take us in.
Removing the hook removes some flesh.
Leaving the hook removes the fish.

I

On a cold day in heaven, I continued to cut wood.
My going out was marked by breath.
My essence met the world
And gave me up in steam.

We lose ourselves in work, they say.
Below zero, we lose ourselves if we don't work.

What we do saves us
From all other deaths but ours.

What we do heats us
In a furious friction with the world.

And so we begin, and so we burn,
And so we wear away.

The arms begin the famous warming.
They cradle and brace,
They rock and they raise the saw like a child.

The blood had it, from the start.
Back from the twinning rivers east of the heart
To the least streams, to the trickle,
To something broken somewhere on the Outer Peninsula
And a nose that blooms like a pickle.

The eyes have it,
But theirs is a bright ice.

The hands have it and lose it.

The feet get it last,
If at all.

The wind finds wormholes in the lungs.
The sweet tunnels all are chapped,
The chapels blank with snow.
The promise red with cold.
Inhaling hurts, the motions thicken,
The skin thins,
The afternoon insists with silent thunder
Except behind the bark, where worms winter under.

II

We lose ourselves in wish, they say.
In the middle of my century
I am lost, at last, in Wednesday.

My wishes timber, but trees fall.
Asleep or waking, dreams become
The snows of childhood, the tune behind the hum.
Sawdust mounts up/ It grieves, it renders: the maul.

I am lost at last in Wednesday,
Burly as a bee, sore as a woken bear.
The cold becomes crystal, slowly, immensely.
An exhibit under glass, me; rock candy, the air.

The oblivious saw which would take my leg as soon as pine,
The saw is hot, I can see.
And everything that air touches burns,
Whether hot or cold I cannot tell.
When two cord is unnerved from earth
And cloven, cut, and laid to rest,
The dark comes from somewhere:
Does it rise, or fall, or does it lie?
Above the white ground, below the white sky.

It is time (and tale, and sense) to go:
The woods all know our way, our wake.
We follow our letters backward to Babel,
Not through the daylight, but through the snow.

III

We know by now the old stories are true.
The woodcutter comes at dusk or after
To a light, a low roof, and, later, laughter.
In the dark was a window, in the window: you.

I went into the warm pottery
Where you worked the ancient dirt and present water
Like the son you had, and like the daughter. . . .
With the wheel, against the turn, motion in poetry.

I stood in the middle, so stiff and strong
I feared I'd shatter the unglazed plates.
I didn't steam, at first,
But you said the cold came off me in waves.
I'm not cold, I said,

I myself AM cold.

It was the terrible knowledge of what we become.

It was the terrible knowledge that we become

And are more than just our future

And more than just our off-color interiors,

All those almost vegetable shapes.

We are become something else to our children

And they in their new lives

Love us, fear us, dream us, talk us back to size

In therapists' offices, other beds

And long walks alone the river.

We are something other, even in a small room.

I came out of the woods and into your wilderness.

Unlike me, you want to sleep and work to dream.

I was finally cold and began to steam.

You were warm and puzzled.

You looked up from your work,

Which demands looking down

And watching your hands do what they do and why;

An anthropologist of sorts, at least your eye.

You were not just you or your hands

But the work between, and warm and puzzled.

Still in the center—not the music,

Not the dancer or the partner, but the dance.

You wiped your hands

And you waited like the clock on the shelf

For a creature who could be cold itself

And give it off, as life gives heat

And trees give leaves and space gives way to sweet.

I felt so large, so locked,
So unknown, so Antarctic.
My vapors so true, the tremble so deep,
They shuddered the room and changed the day.
I noticed I needed to take a breath,
Slowly warming back to life, that is, toward death.

IV

Our teachers have always been cold and heat.
We breathe the steam that either gives to each.
And learn by pain, even a body's safer to touch
Than intimate air that burns too cold, too much.

I lost the lesson and inhabited cold
As grief inhabits birth, as flame the tree.
Then something happened, something more than old:

Complete, you came to the edge; you came to me.

Like time to a moment, seed to strange ground,
First day to first night—and you stayed.

While I thawed to mortal, the debt to sense was paid.
Eternity went up in smoke and longing in a sound.

Your hands dripped extra life; your wheel, it was true.
You called to all there is that needs to be found
And wants to be lost—you put your talent down
And lifted up your laugh the way you do
And said to all that's still outside, "I love even you."

Two Poems

BY COLIN HARRINGTON

Wellfleet at Low Tide

We feel the drag of the sea and the
horizon in the shallows. Farther
out, the continental shelf drops off.
Perilous in waves up to his chest,
a man in waders is casting.
We go out to meet him at the surf,
walking over the ocean floor
through slippery rocks and boulders.
We turn to measure our distance
from the contours of land and
shrinking people. The farther
out on the slippery flats we go,
the keener our sense of belonging there,
hugging the tide drawn
over the world, dissolved
in the rounding sound of the sea.

The Return of the Fishing Boats

Giovanni Boldini

Etretat, 1879

With the waves,
shorebirds gravitate
to returning fishing boats
anchored against the
outgoing tide. They
want fish, still flopping
in the hulls and dying sun
on the calm opal ocean.
Here, fishermen are gods.
Well-dressed bourgeoisie,
crowding around the bending,
bewildered boatmen,
are humbled and the
fishermen are embarrassed
with accomplishment
and fatigue, fisherwives
stand or pace impatiently
with too much to do, preoccupied
with life and death come
home once again.

Two Poems

BY EILEEN GLOSTER

An Act of Contrition

My kneeling daughter has no use
For faith: She sees angels in snow;
Knows God as surely as the spruce
That spirals blue beyond her window.
When night folds its wings around her tree,
She prays to God, her confidant, and friend:
"I am so sorry for having offended thee,"
So sweetly sure of someone to offend.
And I fold my hands to offer praise
For snow that falls like grace on barren trees,
Strain to feel the sureness of those days
When God blessed every single sneeze,
But like old Dostoyevsky's tongue-tied fraud
Can stammer only, "I—I *shall* believe in God."

Living in Skin

1.

Know me from the outside
in. Skin, the line
where I end. You
begin. Perhaps
eyes lead to soul, but first
learn hollow, plane, and curve.
Meet kneecap, knuckle,
eyelid, nose. Spend time
on the surface of things.

2.

The ribs again.
Shadows split your breast,
shrink with every breath.

You curl your lips
slowly in to wet them.
Glance out.

We hold you
in exhale, ink
and charcoal

until you swing
your arms
over your head,

rib lines delicately
revealed. Beauty
so close to hunger.

3

I love my bones,
thin white Halloween spook
holding me up.

4.

The emptiness of sand—
wide, white stretches
of almost nothing.
Rock worn down
to grit between sheets,
a landscape of glare and shadow.

Yet, when I emerge
wet from the sea and lie
on the shore, sand clings
to my skin, conforming,
confirming this body's form.

Vision and Blindness in Greek Tragedy

BY GEROL PETRUZELLA

Ancient Greek society recognized the close and indissoluble bonds that exist among perception, knowledge, action and happiness. The process or state of being in the world begins with correct perception of oneself and the world, predicated upon which is the correct interpretation of this information—understanding the forms and relationships of those things perceived, whether necessary or incidental. Only once the individual has perceived the world and ordered these raw sensory data within a rational/emotive framework can s/he take action in relation to other humans, as well as to the gods. Because of the interconnectedness of each step in this chain, the attainment of *eudaimonia*, happiness or well-being of the soul, is not simply dependent on correct action, nor even upon correct motivation. Rather, the Greek worldview encompasses a more robust perspective on virtue, one that evaluates the individual's perception and interpretation—that is, the individual's vision, both literal and conceptual.

Each of three particular dramatis personae in Greek drama—the prophetess Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, and the seer Teiresias and Oedipus himself in Sophocles' *Oedipus* cycle—deals with vision in

a different way. However, the playwrights' portrayals of them are all consistent with the Greek Weltanschauung; each character, while perceptive in a particular area, lacks the total vision that would characterize a divine being. Cassandra, though possessor of divinely granted foresight, nevertheless is blind and mad in everyone's eyes, because of Apollo's curse upon her. Teiresias, similarly prophetic, is physically blind; and Oedipus enjoys both physical and intellectual clarity of vision, but utter blindness of soul, gaining self-knowledge only after his act of self-blinding. The incompleteness of vision of each of these three characters illustrates the Greeks' conception of the human condition; namely, that some shortfall of total vision is an integral part of humanity—the combination of sight and insight lies solely in the domain of the gods. Cassandra and Teiresias recognize this fact, and their recognition allows them to pursue that *eudaimonia* which is the end of human beings. Oedipus, on the other hand, initially fails to see his own blindness, and so falls into the snare of hubris, pride that exceeds the scope proper to human beings, through an unjustified confidence in his own perceptive and intuitive capabilities—capabilities that, though useful in their own sphere, are unsuitable substitutes for the insight he lacks. In each case, the playwrights' portrayal of these individuals—their characteristic limitations of vision and the attitudes they take in relation to these limits—exemplifies and supports their culture's conception of the role of sight in the meaning of human existence.

Aeschylus' portrayal of Cassandra, like that of his contemporary Pindar (Hammond 211), gives the explanation that her foresight, though a gift of Apollo, is accompanied by the god's curse that her prophecies will always be disbelieved. It is important to understand the cause of this curse in order to appreciate its implications. Cassandra initially spurned Apollo's romantic advances, wanting no part of his attentions. Due to the insistence of the god, she agreed to his demands, resulting in his giving her prophetic sight—his particular provenance. The symbolism is intriguing; Cassandra is faced with a situation wherein she risks losing her identity as a human being—if she submits to the god, she gains the prophetic sight in addition to her own vision, and she, most likely, given the classical mythological tradition, will at the

least bear offspring who will partake of the divine nature through their father, diminishing her relevance as a human being in her own right, and making her merely the outlet for the divine perpetuation of the Olympians and their clan. True, she would gain honor, and a sort of divinity by proxy through her progeny, as well as through her prophetic abilities; however, the basis for her own humanity—the virtue of moderation, in sight, and especially with regard to *sophrosyne*, the “right thinking” or knowledge of one’s place in the world—would be eliminated in the bargain. She would be abstracted from her self as an actual human being, and would instead become a symbolic entity, an abstract generative divine principle, embodied and identified solely as the consort and counterpart of Apollo, god of prophecy.

Cassandra ultimately breaks her word to Apollo, refusing to yield to him and to this divine, dehumanizing fate. Since Apollo has already bestowed the prophetic gift upon her, he is faced with an untenable scenario: Cassandra, though refusing to trade her humanity for the mythic status offered her, nevertheless possesses complete vision as the result of Apollo’s gift. In order to avoid this unnatural situation, the god limits his gift by canceling its intended benefits and making it essentially worthless by precluding the possibility of its fulfilling its essence. Prophecy is an active form of sight; it is unlike physical sight, for example, in that it does not benefit only, or even primarily, the seer him/herself. Rather, by its nature, prophetic vision is exercised on behalf of others, bringing knowledge and perception to them, and not simply to the subject/perceiver. Hence, Cassandra’s prophetic vision—a vision divested of any possibility of credibility—is made imperfect, restoring Cassandra to her condition as a human being who must seek the mean of virtuous action within the context of her limited sight. Her refusal to trade her humanity for the semidivinity offered to her by Apollo is a telling embodiment of the Greek virtue of *sophrosyne*.

Teiresias in Sophocles’ *Oedipus* cycle is another character who successfully comes to terms with his incomplete vision as an integral part of his state as a human being, and thereby demonstrates his integration of the virtue of *sophrosyne* into his character. His acquisition of prophecy was the result of an incident in his youth when he accidentally

witnessed the goddess Athena bathing. She did not cause his death but blinded him, and gave him the power of prophetic insight in compensation for taking his sight. Again, as in Cassandra's case, the granting of prophecy to a human being is necessarily balanced with a diminution of some other type of sight—in Teiresias' case, his physical sight. Also similarly to Cassandra, Teiresias must deal with his sight in relation to a divinity associated with vision—Athena, patron deity of wisdom. An important respect in which Teiresias deals with his limitations of vision is his reliance on his boy to relate, for example, the motions of birds for his augury (Sophocles 231). Teiresias recognizes the necessity of relying on others' vision where his own is wanting; yet he equally recognizes where his own sight is keen and trustworthy—in prophecy—and stands behind it: "Where argument's concerned / I am your man, as much a king as you" (Sophocles 22). The blind seer successfully combines both his keen insight and his lack of eyesight in his character as a human being, and avoids the dangers of excess that accompany the vicious characteristic of hubris.

In contrast with Cassandra and Teiresias—two examples of individuals who successfully integrate their incomplete forms of sight into their understanding of their condition as human beings—stands Oedipus, who egregiously fails to recognize or accept his shortcomings of sight. Oedipus is a man of keen intellectual perception: He is ruler of the polis of Thebes, having gained that position by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, who had oppressed the city for many years. Time and again, Oedipus is described as a solver of riddles (Sophocles 5, 22, 24 et al.); and he comes to rely upon his cognitive abilities in all matters. Unfortunately, he does not accept that his lack of knowledge about his own past and origins lies beyond the scope of this intellect upon which he has come to rely. Thus, he refuses to recognize that his own sight is inadequate to penetrate the mystery that faces him in *Oedipus Rex*—the mystery of his birth, and of his crimes of patricide and maternal incest. In marked contrast with Teiresias, who accepts assistance from those whose sight surpasses his, Oedipus rejects out of hand Teiresias' attempts to show him the truth, preferring instead to accuse the seer of selling his reputation to support a plot by Creon to usurp the throne

(Sophocles 21). Oedipus, unlike Cassandra and Teiresias, believes that it is possible for him to be entirely self-reliant and capable of foreseeing the consequences of his actions. The idea that he might listen to Teiresias' advice—advice from one whose ability in prophecy was well known, and whose integrity was never in doubt—is not only not considered but rejected as unworthy even of consideration; for if Teiresias' prophecy were even remotely true, that would destroy Oedipus' conception of his own self-sufficiency, and would force the king to admit to his shortcomings of sight. Thus, Oedipus' condition is one of compounded blindness: Not only is he blind to his own past and to the meaning of the prophecies of his predestined crimes, but he also willfully chooses to blind himself to his own limitations, choosing to deny that they exist, and relying on his necessarily limited human vision as though it were complete. His *anagnorisis*—the recognition of the truth of his past—is devastating because it shatters his carefully cultivated sense of hubris. Oedipus' *hamartia* is in his blindness; his humanity—and hence his hope of attaining *eudaimonia*—rests with successfully recognizing and accepting his limitations of vision as a human being, and his failure to do this is the tragic element in Sophocles' portrayal.

Classical Greek culture entailed a complex system of beliefs about the nature of human existence. The idea of virtue signified more than a particular morally praiseworthy act or disposition. It was regarded as the essence of true humanity, dependent not on right action or laudable decision alone but on true perception as well. This component of sight was just as essential to human virtue as choice or action; a correct perception of one's strengths and limitations, and the recognition of these circumstances as forming one's humanity, were the hallmark of a truly virtuous and complete human being. It is important to understand that true sight does not mean complete sight; on the contrary, the Greeks saw such full vision as divine, and hence outside the bounds of human experience. Rather, true sight was the understanding of the inherent limits of one's sight, and the willingness to accept those limits.

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Artwork

BY GREG SCHECKLER

Artist's Statement

In the past century, artists developed radical ways of making art based in nonrepresentational methods. But criticism from theorists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Ernst Gombrich attacked nonrepresentational art for its lack of recognizable symbols (Lévi-Strauss, Gombrich). Lacking a well-established grammar of images, what does the artwork mean? How can we determine if it is good or intelligently made? Even the artist Kandinsky noted his own difficulty in giving up on immediately recognizable imagery: "A terrifying abyss of all kinds of questions, a wealth of responsibilities stretched before me. And most important of all: What is to replace the missing object?" (Kandinsky 370).

Artists such as Jackson Pollock replaced imagery with unconscious, randomized processes of art making. They also focused on the material basis of paint in their works—its lively color, fluidity and viscosity. But these artists could not entirely disregard representation and technique. Instead of creating recognizable symbols, they left documentary drippy tracings of the movement of the body, the frenetic rhythms of postwar America, jazzy improvisation and distinct lineages of color theory (Gage). Given these precise connections, labeling artworks "abstract" seems misleading. The artworks should be seen as allusions, not illusions.

In retrospect, I think that "action painting," in its emphasis on the messy, active process of making art out of which order and rationale arise closely models the best current descriptions of consciousness.

The mind is a biological, measurable entity utilizing massively parallel throughput with no apparent center, and action precedes conscious awareness by about half a second (Dennett, Blackmore). Although it's an eternity in terms of neuronal activity, half a second suggests, paint fast. And then paint fast again. The mind is not a mystery but, rather, a series of biological, rhythmic interactions. If we accept contemporary theories of the mind, then in using nonconscious, nonrepresentational, speedy methods for making art, we can modify art theory. We do not require abstract art theories built out of 1950s existentialism, surrealism, spirituality or outdated Freudian models of the mind. Nor do we need postmodern theory. Deconstructivism did not build the Hubble Space Telescope or invent abstract painting. Responding fully to contemporary theories of consciousness also means dropping the heroic, metaphysical, idealized formations that so many modernist (and lately postmodernist) painters sought, because if we accept the new philosophy of consciousness, then we must also accept the efficacy of the scientific method. Art, like scientific endeavors, points toward demonstrable, falsifiable truths. Of course, linking with truth brings with it all the thorny cultural, material and ethical quandaries of scientific methods. Indeed, the sophomoric defense of "I don't know what that art means, but I know what I like"—*de gustibus non est disputandum*—does not apply when art is based in objective measures. Subjective tastes are no longer the main point.

My first professional paintings, in 1988, were abstract designs inspired by colliding water waves, specifically those in Lake Michigan. To this ululating birth cry I've slowly added gestural, scribbly, calligraphic marks, plus collage. Sketchy studies of microscopic cells and quantum tracings pair with macroscopic shapes from galaxies and nebulae. Loose entoptic grids become rows of cells. Meandering scribbles become supernovas. Specifically, I would like to point to the piece *Oscilloborealis*. The central motif came from an oscilloscope, plus scribbings I made after watching the northern lights undulate. Another piece, *Fold Galaxy Skin*, contains a long vertical section on the right indirectly inspired by skin wrinkles and pigmentations. Maybe as metaphor the science-laden residue within these artworks begs the

question "Where do we, given clear evidence of a strange, scientifically verifiable grandeur in which we participate, place ourselves meaningfully?" To me, that question lacks the precise beauty of making smears of paint or ink. Yet even if we find no good verbal or painterly responses to such questions, artistic activity rooted in verifiability, evidential reasoning and scientific innovation today replaces Kandinsky's missing object.

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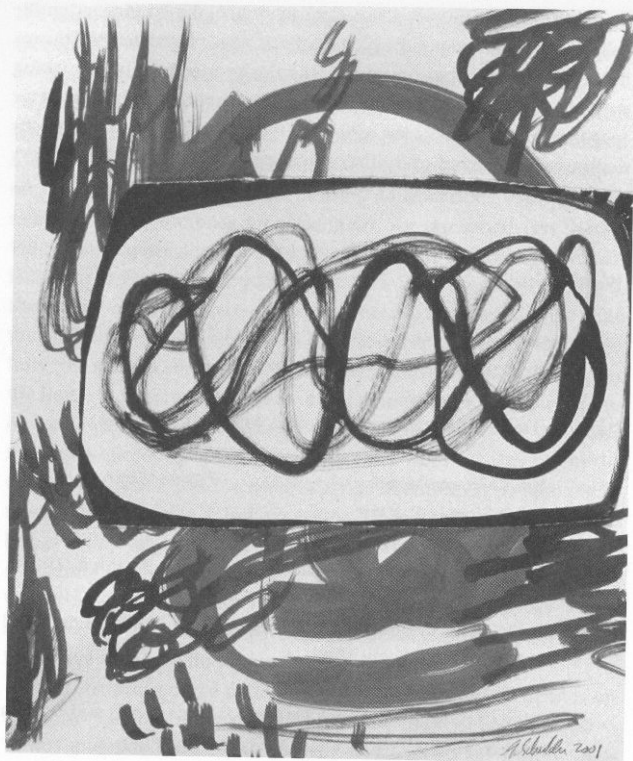
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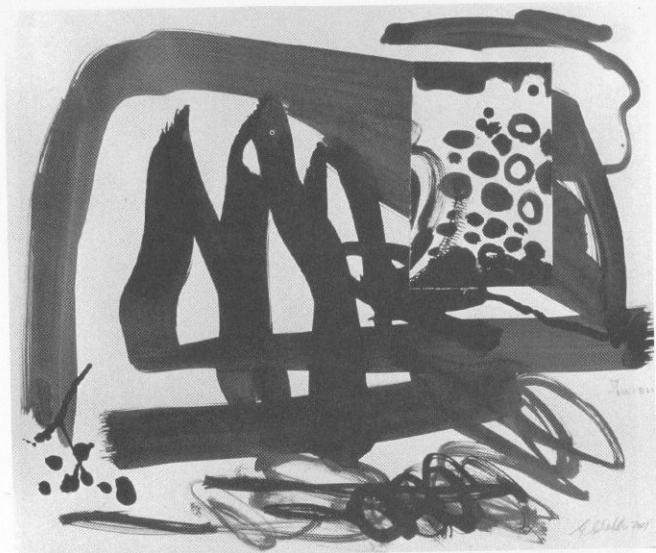
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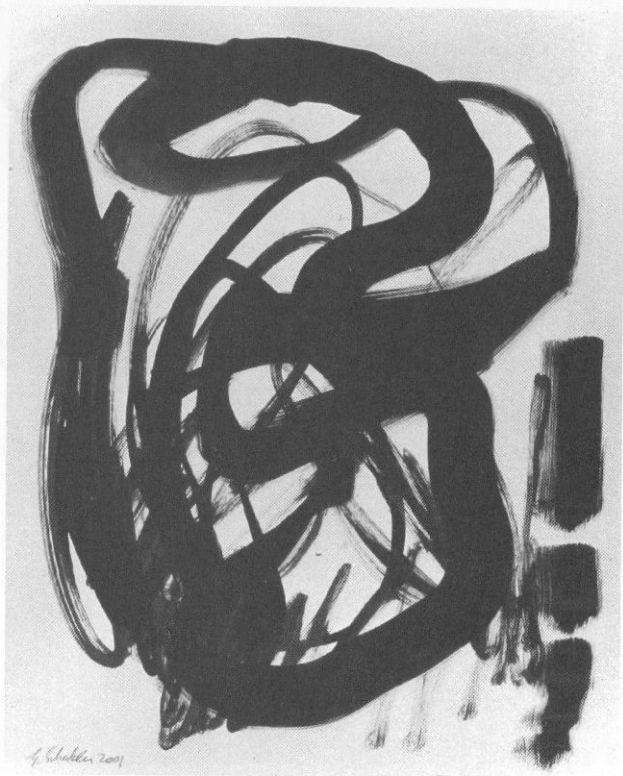
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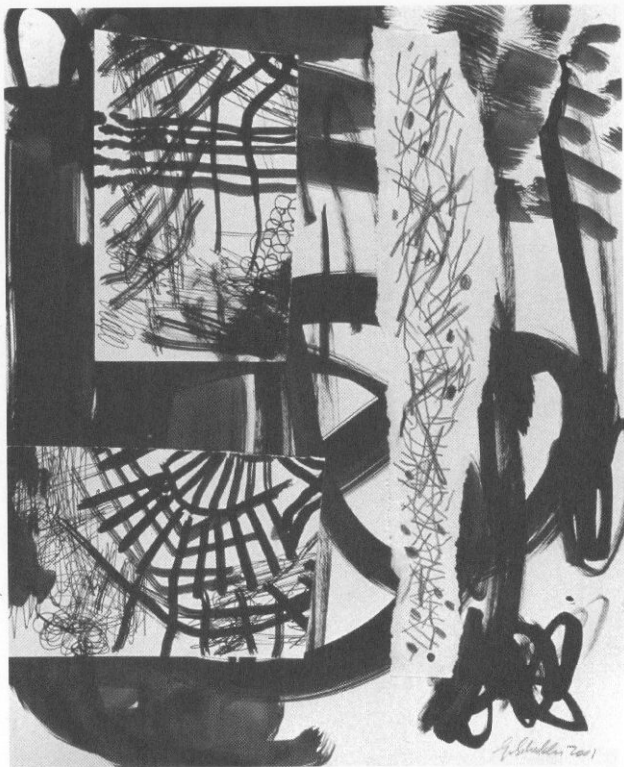
Oscilloborealis. 14" x 17" ink and pencil on paper



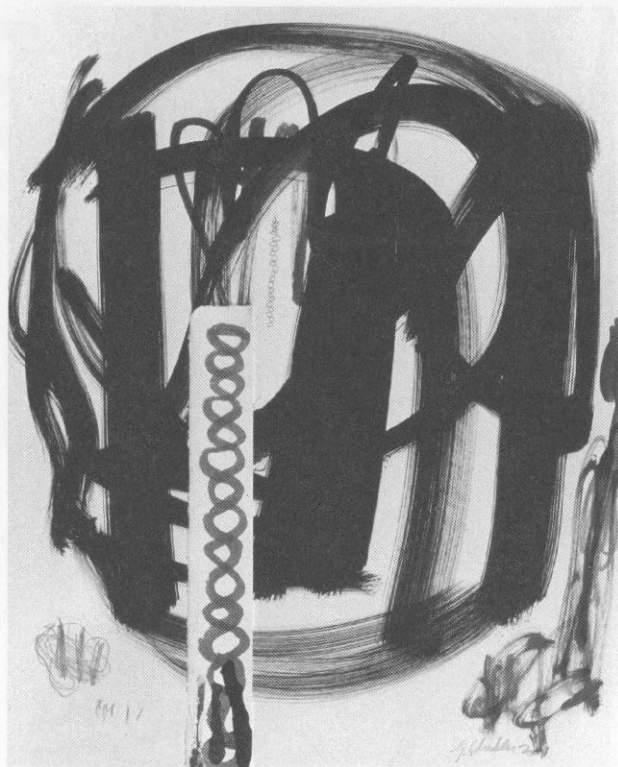
Interference Wave Emanations



Crab Nebula



Fold Galaxy Skin



Twin Gestures



Code Relay Helix

Review Essay

Spirits of a Nation and the Voices of Fiction

In the Name of Salomé by Julia Alvarez
Algonquin Books, 2000

BY BEN JACQUES

Every story has many voices, but not every storyteller can weave those voices into memorable fiction. Such, however, is the artistry of Dominican-American poet and novelist Julia Alvarez, who captured a wide audience in 1991 with her first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. In *García Girls*, Alvarez lets each of the four sisters tell her own tale as she seeks her identity in an American culture sharply at odds with the familial conservatism of a Dominican heritage. At various points in their young lives, the García sisters rebel against their parents, fight over boyfriends, marry, enter professions, get divorced. But although they stretch the familial bonds, they don't allow them to snap. Family may be both blessing and curse, but it is family.

In *¡Yo!*, the 1997 sequel to *García Girls*, Alvarez brings more voices onto the stage, cleverly allowing all those "fictionally victimized" by Yolanda in her first novel, including her parents, to have their say. But it is in her acclaimed historical novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) that Alvarez masters the art of multivoice narration. With penetrating insight, she re-creates the personalities of *las mariposas*, the four daughters of a Dominican farmer, as they are drawn into the struggle against

the dictatorship of General Rafael Trujillo. The result is a richly characterized fabric of individuality within family. While Dedé, the only one to survive Trujillo's brutality, is portrayed in third-person narration, Minerva and Patria tell their stories in the first person. The youngest, María Teresa, reveals herself to us through entries in her diary.

By creating fictional characters for the Mirabal sisters, Alvarez demythologizes them. She brings them to life again, not as saints but as ordinary girls and women who respond to oppression out of their deep personal values.

The ink of *Butterflies* was barely dry, as Alvarez puts it, when she began work on a second historical novel, the life of Salomé Ureña de Henríquez, 19th-century Dominican poet, patriot and educator. True to form, Alvarez recognized Salomé's life as the story of a family—a story of many voices—told through the eyes of Salomé and her daughter, Camila Henríquez Ureña.

In the Name of Salomé is Alvarez' most elaborately structured novel, containing a prologue and 16 paired chapters. The first chapter opens in war-torn Santo Domingo in 1856 in the first-person voice of Salomé. She is six, and just beginning to understand that the charming, witty gentleman stopping by for a visit is her father, separated from her mother. The next chapter jumps more than a century to the year 1960 in the United States. Camila, Salomé's daughter, has just decided to retire from a career as a Vassar College professor and return to the Caribbean. As the book unfolds, the intertwining stories of mother and daughter approach each other in time and spirit, even as the titles, set in English and Spanish, mirror each other in inverse pattern.

The book's design, which an editor has compared to a sestina, "is something I perceived from the structure of poetry," Alvarez comments. "I like to think of my novels as having a songlike structure."

Born six years after national independence from Spain, and exactly a century before Alvarez, Salomé Ureña inspired patriotism and reform during one of the most turbulent epochs of Dominican history, scarred by civil wars and a succession of dictators. She was raised in a modest home by a conservative mother and aunt and inspired by her poet and diplomat father. As a teenager, she begins writing passionate,

frank poems about love and politics, using a pen name known only by her father. When the potentially seditious poems find their way into print, even her unwitting, timid mother praises them for expressing "what we all feel and don't have the courage to speak."

It is not long before her identity as *la musa de la patria* is revealed, attracting the attention of those in power and those she inspires. Not yet 20, she marries a young suitor in love with her art, if not with the artist herself. He later leaves her and the children to study medicine in France.

As a poet, Salomé envisions a free society; but as an educator, she works to shape it. In an era when even the daughters of the wealthy are discouraged from literacy, Salomé founds the Instituto de Señoritas, taking on "the hard work of rebuilding my *patria*, girl by girl."

Her daughter, Camila, also becomes an educator, teaching in Cuba after her family goes into exile there. But it isn't long before she is driven by Batista's threats to the United States, where she takes a job teaching Spanish at Vassar. At retirement age, she returns to Cuba to volunteer in the literacy programs initiated after the revolution.

In the stories of Salomé and Camila, their parents, husbands, children, siblings, compatriots, lovers are echoes of the Butterflies and their families. We hear again the persistent questions: "What is a *patria*? A homeland? Who are we as a people? How do we serve?" And the enduring question Salomé must direct to her husband as well as her country: "Is love stronger than anything else in the world?"

For Salomé's struggle is personal as well as political, familial as well as national. She and, to a lesser extent, her daughter must endure the suffocating patriarchy of an old-world society. Salomé's struggle to breathe, however, is more than figurative. She suffers frequent bouts of asthma. Infected with tuberculosis, she succumbs at the age of 47, when Camila is but a young child.

Salomé and Camila are also victimized, in different ways, by attitudes about race and sexual orientation. In one of the revealing details of the novel, we learn that the artist painting the only surviving portrait of the national poet thinned her nose and straightened her hair to hide her mulatto features. Camila and especially her dark-

skinned brother, Pedro, a distinguished scholar and Harvard lecturer, face similar prejudice in the United States. In Washington, D.C., in the 1920s, they are turned away from an elegant café serving only whites. Pedro complains of “the terrible moral disinheritance of exile.”

Camila also suffers the unbearable disapprobation of her brother, her soulmate, when he uncovers her affair with a woman.

If anything, *In the Name of Salomé* is a call for inclusion, self-determination, freedom, respect and tolerance. Reduced to the level of one person, one family, on any given street in any given city in the hemisphere, Alvarez seems to be saying, the struggle is the same.

“I do think my writing gives voice to those who have no voice,” Alvarez says. She acknowledges that her writing is political, in the way Neruda, Whitman and Maxine Hong Kingston are political. But if her writing has power, she believes, it is the power of the story—and of the words themselves.

Like her poetry, Alvarez’ prose is vigorous and vivid. Seasoned lightly with Spanish, her English often sings with the cadences of Spanish. Her descriptions are apt—she went to great pains to research 19th-century scenes—and her metaphors are evocative. In prerevolution Cuba, Camila asks the stuttering artist who is sculpting a figure of her mother, using her as a model, to call her by her first name. “She has noticed with a little thrill that he never stumbles over her name. Camila, he says it clearly each time, like cracking open a shell without ever bruising the enclosed almond.”

Alvarez’ use of language is shaped by her bilingual, bicultural past and present. A “Vermont writer from the Dominican Republic,” as she calls herself in an essay in *Something to Declare*, she moves in two worlds. She and her husband divide their time between Vermont, where she is writer in residence at Middlebury College, and their coffee farm in the Dominican mountains, which they operate as a collective with area farmers.

What she says about *Butterflies* is also true for *In the Name of Salomé*: “Writing the novel led me to connect deeply not only with my characters, but with the Dominican Republic. I had to become a Latin American again.” In the postscript of *Butterflies*, she explains further: “For I

wanted to immerse my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that I believe can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination. A novel is not, after all, a historical document, but a way to travel through the human heart."

Nowhere is this illustrated better than in the last chapter of *In the Name of Salomé*. Working in Cuba's literacy program in 1973, Camila has been sent to read to women in a coffee cooperative while they sort coffee beans. One day she sets aside the official reading materials and instead recites a short poem by her mother:

There sleeps my little one, all mine!
There sleeps the angel who enchants my world!
I look up from my book a dozen times,
Absorbed with him, I haven't read a word.

Hands come to rest, and all eyes turn to the aging *profesora*. Mothers and daughters, they have heard. For a moment in their difficult, sweaty lives, they forget about the foreman and the pressure to make quota. They have been entranced by words affirming the sacredness of life, *their* lives. "The real revolution," Camila muses, "can only be won by the imagination."

Note: Unfortunately for the bilingual reader, *In the Name of Salomé* doesn't include Ureña's poems in Spanish, though Alvarez translates small portions into English. Several Spanish collections have been published in the Dominican Republic and Spain. The latest, *Poesías completas*, was published in Santo Domingo by the Comision Permanente de la Feria Nacional del Libro in 1997.

Film Review

Traffic: Drugs or Vouchers, Anyone?

BY MEERA TAMAYA

The movie *Traffic* won a Golden Globe for its scriptwriter, Stephen Gaghan, and an Oscar for its director, Steven Soderbergh. The latter's recent movies *Erin Brockovich* and *Traffic* are widely different in cinematic technique and are highly entertaining and instructive. Both deal with urgent social issues: the first with environmental pollution by the Pacific Gas & Electric Company and the second with the futile drug war waged by the U.S. government.

Traffic, based on the British TV movie *Traffik*, focuses on all aspects of drug smuggling: its point of origin in Mexico, especially Tijuana, controlled by competing drug lords; its distribution by a "respectable" businessman and his socialite wife in California; and, finally, the constant and unwinnable war against the whole billion-dollar business by the DEA and Robert Wakefield, the drug czar appointed by the American President. Wakefield, as played by Michael Douglas, is an honest man who tries to acquaint himself with all aspects of the war on drugs, but who is initially unaware that his own seemingly perfect daughter, a National Merit Scholar, has been initiated by her preppy boyfriend into the ecstasy of freebasing cocaine.

The movie does what all good movies and, if I may risk a generalization, good art should do: knock the ground off your secure, quotidian existence, thrust you, all disbelief suspended, into an alien, unimaginable but richly realized and detailed world and keep you on the edge of your seat, without a moment's letup, for the entire duration of the movie. The visual storytelling, combined with dialogue that sounds real while at the same time making the points the scriptwriter and director want to make and, of course, superb acting, all of which *Traffic* has plenty of, assures us this edge-of-the-seat experience.

First, there is the surprise of color: The Mexican scenes are shot in sepia and ocher, the scenes with the drug czar have a blue underwater tinge and the California scenes, centered mostly on the beautiful, social-climbing wife (played by Catherine Zeta-Jones) of the drug distributor, are in dazzling color. These choices are brilliant, suggestive of the poverty in Mexico that makes drug production a lucrative means of survival, the bureaucracy's clueless earnestness and the colorful results of drug dealing and use. Since the story lines are multiple and interweaving, the use of color helps us stay on track in the labyrinthine world of drug smuggling. Crosscutting and montage allow the editor to present intricate story lines simultaneously, and with great clarity. There is both sweep and detail.

The portraits of the sadistic Mexican drug czar, General Salazar, whose courtly manners make his use of torture to extract confessions all the more horrifying, the businessman/drug kingpin's wife, whose initial horror at discovering her husband's real business turns into cold-blooded self-interest at all costs and, finally, and most poignantly, Wakefield's daughter, who haunts the tenderloin districts of Cincinnati, and her degradation as she prostitutes herself for a fix, are all vividly detailed.

And this is where I would like to register my one, but major, caveat against the film. The pathos of the movie, almost unbearable at times, springs from white, upper-middle-class suffering. Wakefield's family, particularly his daughter, are the victims whose faces are captured in agonizing close-ups. While everyone else is morally ambiguous, the wholly innocent are white middle-class children. White

adolescents haunt predominantly black neighborhoods in search of drugs. The preppy boyfriend defends black dealers in an impassioned speech to Wakefield: What do you expect poor blacks to do when white upper-class kids flood black neighborhoods, begging for drugs, offering to pay three times the street value? Wouldn't you supply the demand? Or words to that effect. It is economics, stupid. Where there is demand, the supply will never cease.

True enough, but the movie that purports to take a comprehensive and in-depth look at drug smuggling ignores the devastation caused by drugs among poor blacks *and* whites and all the shades in between. Crack is mostly the drug of choice among the poor, because it is relatively cheap. Crack-addicted mothers who prostitute themselves in roach-and-rat-infested abandoned buildings, who give birth to addicted babies, are not photogenic. Freebasing cocaine in plush surroundings or even squalid hotels is a lot more pathos-inducing, especially when it is followed by rehabilitation in sylvan surroundings. Alas, the movie, despite its many and undeniable merits, does not escape Hollywood blinkers—it ignores the difference class makes in drug addiction and pretends that all of America—at least all of America that *matters*—is white and affluent. A myth, one of many, that serves to bolster and sustain a Republican government. It is not difficult to imagine President Bush offering vouchers for those who seek drug rehabilitation.

Book Review

Satire or Self-Hatred?

Blue Angel by Francine Prose

Harper Collins, 2000

BY MEERA TAMAYA

Blue Angel belongs to that very enjoyable genre—the campus novel. As practiced by David Lodge and Richard Russo, it has a nice blend of satire and a sort of dilettante’s overview of the “intellectual” issues that periodically roil academic campuses in England and America. David Lodge, in particular, manages to combine satire and sympathy while taking on current feuds among literary theorists as well as tensions between town and gown in *Small World* and *Nice Work*. In *Blue Angel*, set in an elite private college in Vermont, Francine Prose targets political correctness, particularly as it manifests itself in issues of sexual harassment, reminiscent of the witch-hunts conducted by the early Puritan settlers.

Initially, the novel is a good read: The prose is seamless, the plot ingenious and the protagonist, Swenson, a professor of creative writing who has not written anything since his acclaimed first novel, is a believable, sympathetic character, whose point of view informs the novel. The title *Blue Angel* alludes to the movie in which Marlene Dietrich plays a coldhearted nightclub singer who torments an infatuated professor. When Swenson, a faithful husband and caring father, comes across a genuinely gifted student in a largely mediocre class, he

is shaken out of his customary ennui. The student is loaded with metal studs and rings on every conceivable part of her body, has orange and green hair, wears unrelieved black and combat boots and her stories about her parents and childhood are riddled with discrepancies. That none of these sound warning bells in the addled, besotted brain of the professor says a great deal about his self-absorption and consequent obtuseness. Even when the nubile young girl aggressively seeks out Swenson's help in enlisting his agent, the infatuated professor does not step on the brakes of his middle-aged ardor. As he sees it, "There's something erotic about the act of teaching, all that information streaming back and forth like some bodily fluid. Doesn't *Genesis* trace sex to that first bite of apple, not the fruit from just any tree, but the Tree of Knowledge?" (22). This in a small ingrown college that decorates its walls with portraits of the fire-and-brimstone 18th-century preacher Jonathan Edwards, and whose academic dean is determined to hunt down the slightest hint of anything sexual between teacher and students. Inevitably, the denouement becomes all too predictable.

The novel begins promisingly enough with a judicious mixture of the satire and sympathy characteristic of a campus novel, but in the second half, the sympathy unaccountably dries up, especially with regard to the women characters. Women friends become vengeful Eumenides, and even Swenson's wife, a sort of kindly earth mother, becomes harsh and turns out to be a lesbian. Does one have to be a lesbian to turn against a husband who is obsessed with a student? Especially when the student is so disturbed that she has attempted suicide several times?

Political correctness and its attendant hysteria sweep across the country from time to time, but given the fact that men have traditionally considered women easy and rightful prey for their attentions, whether welcome or not, the hysteria may be seen as a corrective swing of the pendulum to the other, perhaps regrettable, extreme. Prose is so hell-bent on bashing political correctness that she fails to see that its opposite, political *incorrectness*, has down the ages led to unimpeded victimization of the powerless. Indeed, so extreme is her invective toward the end, and so black and white her characterization, with the men portrayed as hapless victims of predatory women,

that this reader was left wondering whether Prose does not hate women—an aspect of self-hatred that lurks even among the most intelligent of subjugated groups, a self-hatred that has its origins in the realization, perhaps unconscious, that the best means of survival is by identifying and colluding with powerful oppressors.

A good satirist mocks everything impartially, but, alas, Prose is far too partisan. By focusing on one aspect of political debates, she is guilty of the very extremes of the ideological warfare that she satirizes. So the novel, which starts out as a pleasure to read, declines into a morose, one-sided invective that does justice neither to the characters nor to the issues.

Review Essay

Finding the Heart in Darkness

The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver
HarperPerennial, 1999

BY ROBERT BENCE

At first glance, *The Poisonwood Bible* did not seem destined to excite this reviewer. Yes, it is set in the Congo during the turbulent political times of the 1960s, and this context is the only reason I gave popular novelist Barbara Kingsolver's best-seller a chance. But I doubted that the characters and the organizational style would hold my interest. Both narrative and reflections are presented by the American characters, a missionary's wife and their four daughters. Insight into African minds is slim to none. However, if one accepts this narrow focus of Kingsolver's attention, wow, what an amazing job she has done of giving a fresh and female perspective on the heart-of-darkness theme.

The story line is fairly simple, and almost predictable. A severely unprepared missionary, self-destructively nursing an inner guilt and anger, drags initially servile wife and four naïve daughters to an isolated mission in what was then the Belgian Congo just prior to a major political and social upheaval. Few travelers to Africa have had the cards stacked against them as much as this family. Through narratives of the five women, we read about their past, their reactions to life at the mission and later reflections on the impact of these experiences on

their lives. Kingsolver sets the tone with "What do we know, even now? We can only speak of the things we carried with us, and the things we took away." The author masterfully helps us understand what the women took away, and what they left, even though the characters may not always have understood the impact of Africa on their family and their individual lives.

As the story develops, it becomes almost painfully clear that what the five women need to leave behind, literally and figuratively, is their male authority figure. The Reverend Nathan Price is almost a throw-back to 17th-century Calvinism. He is portrayed as an exaggerated zealot who continually sees life as a fairly joyless test of wills. For him, Africans are descended from the Tribes of Ham, naked people who have a darkness of skin and soul. He can learn nothing from the local Congolese about even basic agriculture (such as how to avoid the sting of poisonwood), much less spiritual nuances. Africa eventually chews up and spits out this kind of folk, and we readers know his fate is doomed. The mystery is whether or not his wife and children can escape in time. And, of course, escaping from the past is never easy or complete.

The rest of the family vaguely resembles the stranded passengers on Gilligan's Island, though infinitely more complex. The eldest daughter, Rachel, is a self-focused teenager, primarily concerned with beauty and wealth as they are defined in 1950s United States. Twin sisters Leah and Adah are more thoughtful, but they differ on their approach to and acceptance of Africa and their choice of coping mechanisms. Ruth May, the youngest girl, represents innocence and joy for life. The mother, as is usually the case, struggles to hold this family together through challenges she can only begin to understand.

Tropical heat, rain, drought, diseases, insects and culture shock are almost always sufficient factors to overwhelm any misplaced group. But Kingsolver overlays this poor family with another level of unfathomable confusion and anguish, the first major Cold War struggle in Africa. She slowly weaves in some of the details of Congolese independence, the deployment of western forces in search of indigenous Marxists and the execution of populist Patrice Lumumba by a U.S.-supported army. The Price family's knowledge of the geopolitical

nature of their travails is limited by their inability to understand the lingua franca and comprehend the depth of the human drama that is unfolding in front of them. Ironically, their level of information and understanding is about the same as that of their confused fellow citizens on the other side of the Atlantic, safely viewing brief newsreels of images of uniformed black men with unpronounceable names. While one daughter would eventually stay in the Congo (soon to become Zaire, ruled by U.S.-supported dictator Mobutu) and come to understand and love Africa and Africans, as well as fight for justice, basic survival is the only option for what is left of the family. Heroes and heroines seldom emerge from such quests into the heart of darkness.

Kingsolver's use of well-researched U.S. foreign policy in this work is impressive. Placing characters in calamitous historical events adds to the drama of a novel, but the author's use of the first Congolese civil war is, unintentionally or not, quite insightful. Both the National Security Council and most members of the Price family, especially the father, oversimplify the Congo, evaluate it and react to it with inappropriate constructs of reality and expectation. The fictitious Reverend Price and the real Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (who died in 1959 but played a huge role in setting the tone for U.S. foreign policies) shared a narrow-minded, sanctimonious, good-versus-evil view of the world. There were no gray areas in their crusades to promote "civilization." And when their constructs failed, as they had to eventually, most of the Prices and the U.S. government ran for personal and political safety, leaving the Congo, as well as their own family and society, worse off. One wonders if the U.S. State Department has reflected as much on its traumatic involvement in the Congo as Kingsolver's characters have. My own brief experience at the Zaire desk at Foggy Bottom makes me doubt it.

So, besides some insights into tragic U.S. African policies, what is the appeal of this novel? The totalities of most characters are difficult to accept as real. The missionary family often acts as if it lives in 1760 instead of 1960. As a former resident of the Bible Belt, I have never witnessed anything close to the impenetrable fanaticism Kingsolver ascribes to Reverend Price. Although the wife and daughters may be a tad more realistically portrayed and their individual transformations

may hold the interest of many readers, their naïveté often seems overstated. A positive judgment on the depth of Kingsolver's characterizations is not prerequisite for connecting with this book. What touched me was the eventual ability of some of the characters to reflect less on themselves and more on Africa and Africans. At least one of the sisters begins to see how tolerant, polite and helpful the African village residents were during the Price family's traumatic adventures, while the misplaced Americans remained oblivious to some extraordinary outreaches from their fellow humans. Offers of marriage were made to ease the burden on their family—Price family complaints about food scarcity were tolerated with a smile by the malnourished locals—Africans graciously responded to denigrating remarks about their historic beliefs and practices. Like other western travelers to Africa, the Prices are blinded by their own sense of deprivation to the kindness of those who are really deprived.

For me, reading *The Poisonwood Bible* brought back memories of my own, albeit much less dangerous and dramatic, travels in Africa. I thought about the times I visibly winced or whined about the lack of comfort and amenities, only later recognizing the patience and generous self-sacrifices shown by my accommodating hosts. Once while working and living in a small village in southern Sudan, I casually mentioned to our Sudanese hosts that we would be interested in meeting some of the area's elusive nomads. Three days later, a driver in an antiquated dump truck showed up at our door, and we were offered the opportunity to drive up into the hills to visit and share some warm camel's milk with a family of nomads in a nearby encampment. Our Sudanese friends had somehow secured some rare aluminum lawn chairs in an attempt to make our journey comfortable. At the end of the rainy season, the road was potholed and we bounced all over the bed of the truck in the flimsy chairs. Most of them broke before we completed the journey, and we arrived an hour later, shaken and somewhat ill. It was only later that we realized what a complex logistical task our friends had undertaken. Trucks were rare, gas was being rationed and human and material resources were scarce. In our discomfort, we did not realize what great efforts our friends had expended in order to

satisfy our curiosity. Similar episodes of extreme generosity would be repeated over and over again.

What skilled diplomats Africans are—they silently anguish about visitor comfort and are quietly tending to the needs of their unappreciative and culturally unaware guests, ignoring potentially hurtful characterizations of their societies. Fortunately, we have novels such as *The Poisonwood Bible* to remind us that the understated kindness of Africans is one of the things we should acknowledge and carry away from Africa.

Contributors

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